

MBC – 10/10/2021 – Pastor Doug Thompson

JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH

“The Tongue Test”

James 3:1-12

Why are we studying the epistle of James – and why is James even in our Bibles? Martin Luther wasn't so sure it should be. Is it even a Christian book? It only mentions Jesus twice and it is full of imperatives – commands. I mean, it reads like it's mostly law and very little Gospel. Well there is Gospel in James, we saw that clearly in chapter one: *“Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth!”* James assumes the Gospel of grace. That is the foundation upon which he builds.

If you weren't here last Sunday, I hope you will listen to that message because I tried to explain that Paul and James don't contradict each other, they complement each other: Paul says that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. James, says, “Well of course! And the faith that saves, is never alone, it bears fruit, and here is what that fruit looks like.”

The reason we study James is to see how to be fruitful for Christ!”

- In my circle of pastor friends, we talk a lot about “preaching Christ.” And for some reason, we tend to equate preaching Christ with preaching justification by faith alone. James reminds us that we also preach Christ by preaching how we should *follow* Christ, *obey* Christ, and *be like* Christ.

He is going to do that again this morning, so let's read it together—

- James 3:1–12 ¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

So often we have seen in James that he echoes the teaching of his brother, Jesus. Let me read you what Jesus said in—

- Matt.12:33-37 ³³“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. (He's saying: make up your mind, are you with me or against Me?) ³⁴You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good person out of his good treasure brings

forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷for by your words you will be *justified*, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Now Jesus uses the word “*justified*” here exactly the way James used it in our passage from last week (you need to listen to that message) when he said that we are *justified* by our works, not by faith alone – he meant that our works demonstrate, and give evidence of our faith. Here, Jesus says that at the Judgment, our words will *demonstrate* and give *evidence* of whether or not we were truly saved by grace through faith. You have to let that sink in: our words are such an accurate gauge of our hearts, that our words alone show whether or not we have been born again.

Hold this thought while I go off-road for a couple minutes—

I found some articles this week about the Jesus movement in Indiana in the early 70’s – that God used to bring me to Christ. I was like Saul of Tarsus – I was running from God, not looking for a “personal relationship with Jesus!” But God grabbed me from behind and saved me anyway. I didn’t know what had happened to me, in that Jesus house, praying in a circle with a bunch of Jesus Freaks, but I had been born again – born from above. And I was immediately, radically changed. *Beloved, Jesus radically changes everyone He saves. (repeat)*

- 2 Corinthians 5:17 ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

And the change is so observable, and demonstrable, that Scripture can say, “If you have been born again, this is what your life will look like. If you have been saved by the grace of God, this will be the evidence.” The entire epistle of 1 Jn. was written to give the observable evidence that you have been born again. If salvation is the *cause*, here will be the unmistakable *effects*—

- 1 John 2:3 ³And *by this we know that we have come to know him*, if we keep his commandments.
- 1 John 2:4–5 ⁴Whoever *says* “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. *By this we may know that we are in him.*
- 1 John 3:14 ¹⁴*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.*

And John is over the top, black and white when he says—

- 1 John 3:9–10 ⁹No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰By this it is *evident* who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

Beloved, it’s the Scriptures that say Christians are radically different because we have been BORN AGAIN! We are new creations in Christ – we have passed out of death into life! Hallelujah, praise Jesus! I feel like I’m back in my bell-bottoms and tie-died t-shirt!

So back to James: James does just what 1 John does, James deals with the *effects, results, and evidences* of a true, saving faith. I said when we began this series: “If you want to explain the Gospel to someone, don’t tell them to read James!” If you want to know *how* to be saved, read Paul. If you want to know if you *are* saved – read James. He gives tests of a living faith.

And here in ch.3, he gives the tongue test: if Jesus has saved you, your speech will not be the same as it was before you knew Him. Jesus said, “*For out of the abundance (or overflow) of the heart, the mouth speaks.*”

- Your words reveal your heart – and in Scripture, the heart is the inner person, the inner you: so the words you speak shout out what you think, what you value, and what you believe. Your words reveal the true you. So follow me here: your tongue is like a “**mini-me**” (to use an Austin Powers analogy) it tells the whole story about who you are.

And what James says about the tongue here is not encouraging. Did you notice? He’s brutally honest here. He wants to convict us and remind us how powerful and potentially destructive our words can be. He wants to humble us and move us to search our hearts and cry out to God for grace – and that’s a good thing. He starts with teachers—

I. The teacher’s peril.

- James 3:1 ¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that *we* who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

We have to admire James for his humility – he includes himself here, doesn’t he? If our words are so powerful with so much potential for good or evil, then those in the position to teach others God’s Word are doubly accountable.

In James’ day, before any of the NT had been written down, the role of the teacher was so important: Teachers communicated the Gospel and all that was new in the New Covenant. They are listed right after Apostles and prophets in Paul’s lists of spiritual gifts. Some men wanted the honor of the title, without having the calling or the character. We read over and over that false teachers were a plague in the early church. They still are. Paul says in 1 Tim.1:7 says that there were men who—

- 1 Timothy 1:7 --desired to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

And there still are! So James says, “Be very slow – think twice – about seeking to be a teacher. Not many of you should become teachers because *we* – he includes himself – and I include myself – will be judged more strictly. I.e., God holds the teacher of His Word *doubly* accountable, for two things:

1.) For the content of his teaching. He is only to teach the truth. Peter said “Whoever speaks, (let him speak) as one who speaks the oracles of God – i.e., the very words of God.” Paul said, “*rightly handling the word of truth.*” I’m constantly grieved by preachers who hardly even refer to Scripture, and when they do, they mangle it. They are going to have to answer to God. And they will have to answer for—

2.) The consistency of his character. Have they lived what they have taught? Have they modelled their teaching by their lives? A teacher of God's Word should be able to say: "Do as I say, *and* as I do." Paul could say that to Timothy—

- 2 Timothy 3:10 ¹⁰You, however, have followed my *teaching*, my *conduct*, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness.

But Jesus had to warn the crowds about their religious leaders—

- Matthew 23:2–3 ²"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they *preach*, but do not *practice*.

No wonder James said "Not many of you should become teachers – because we will incur a stricter judgment." And believe me, that judgment isn't just off in the future, it's also on the *conscience* in the present. I tremble every time I read this verse. I'm a sinner. Who am I to stand in the pulpit, and tell you what God's Word says when I fall so far short myself? Often when I am walking and praying, I remember—

- Psalm 50:16 ¹⁶But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?" Who do you think you are?

Then I remind myself that it's the devil who would tell me to shut up. God says to me, "Repent, you sinner, and keep preaching – in season, and out of season." Then James goes on to speak of—

II. The power of our words.

- James 3:2 ²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

James admits that even believers blow it constantly – we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Thank you Jesus for covering our sins by Your blood! And there is no place we stumble as often as in our words. Amen? People can't see into our hearts, but they can hear our words and know exactly what's in there – mini-me spills it all. How many times have you stumbled in what you've said recently?—

- You spoke harshly; your words were sharp and cutting; you spread gossip about people; maybe you lied, or misled others; you used profanity or what Paul called "foolish talk and coarse jesting." You watched the news and called people nasty names! God forgive me!

And it all reflects the sin in your heart. Very accurately. But it's also true, if you are a Christian, that you spoke words of prayer and praise to God, and words of worship. And when the Spirit filled you, God used your words to encourage and counsel others. James is just making the point that our words reflect our hearts: and if we were able to speak perfect words, that would reflect a perfect heart – and we will never see that in another human being—

*But we see it in our Lord Jesus, don't we? He was a perfect man, and every word He spoke was perfect, and beautiful, and gracious and true, and exactly what people needed to hear. Perfect words from a perfect heart—

- Matthew 7:28 ²⁸And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,
- 1 Peter 2:22–23 ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten.
- Luke 4:22 ²²And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”
- Even some of the temple officers once blurted out— “No one ever spoke like this man!” John 7:46

Look at v.2 again: “For we all stumble in many ways” – that’s us. “And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, He is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” – that’s the Lord Jesus. So here is an application for you and me: strive to be like Jesus in your speech. Shouldn’t it be a lifetime pursuit to study the perfect words of this perfect Man?

Beloved, the more discipline you have over your speech, the more discipline you will have over your entire life. It’s true!

“But James, you are over-reacting: our tongue is so tiny, how can you say that it affects our lives so drastically?” Well the truth is, little “mini-me” has a lot of control over your life! James thinks of 3 example of things that are small, but powerful—

A. A horse’s bit.

- James 3:3 ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

James was impressed by that: a horse is a powerful creature. It takes a lot to break a horse, but once it’s broken, that small bit in its mouth can control this powerful creature and make it go wherever the rider wants it to go.

B. A ship’s rudder.

- James 3:4 ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

James was impressed by ships too, and there were some massive ships in his day: the ship that carried Paul to Rome held 276 people. But even a massive ship is controlled by a relatively small rudder. And that’s just like our tongue: it’s small, but powerful, and if you can control it, you can control your entire body—

C. A small spark.

- James 3:5 ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

The power and potential of the tongue is all out-of-proportion to its size. He thinks of a forest fire – and actually, he had in mind wildfires, just like the ones we have in California. These massive fires we’ve the last few years all started with just a little spark: from a weed-whacker, or a cigarette, or even a match – “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”

*And how many *wars* have been started by just a few words? How many *marriages* have ended when there was no infidelity or physical violence, just cruel, abusive *words*? Think about that. You might be estranged from a friend or family member because of a sentence. Am I right? If you speak the wrong word at the wrong time, you could lose your job, get “cancelled” on social media – in this country, speak the wrong word in the wrong place, you could lose your life! James goes on—

- James 3:6 ⁶And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining (the word means to defiling, corrupting) the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Tell us what you really think, James. **Mini-me** can be a bad dude! Human beings can speak words that come straight from hell—

Last Thursday night, some of us heard words of politicians, judges, and so-called scientists, justifying the murder of the unborn. Words straight from Satan, set on fire by hell. But do you remember the time when Satan even used Peter’s mouth – to tell Jesus that he would never let Him be crucified? Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!”

- If you’ve had too much to drink (and that is sin), but if you have and you get behind the wheel, you aren’t in control of that vehicle, the alcohol is, and the results can be disastrous. But beloved, if the Holy Spirit is not filling your heart and controlling what comes out of your mouth, then what is? Your own flesh? That can be disastrous, amen? Can demons even effect your speech? If it happened to Peter, I don’t see why it couldn’t happen to you and me. That should scare the bejeebers out of us!
- Pro 18:21 “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Really? Death and life? Absolutely. Wrong words can kill—
- On Sunday, July 13, 2014, Conrad Roy got into his truck in a parking garage, and committed suicide by poisoning himself with carbon monoxide. But for weeks his girlfriend, Michelle Carter, had been constantly texting him, urging him to go through with it by. She was arrested, and found guilty of involuntary manslaughter – for her words – and sent to prison. *Murder by words!*
- When I was in Jr. High some buddies of mine thought it would be really funny to make up an awful rumor about me. They thought they were just being funny, but it made the rounds and affected me for years. How much more, today, rumors and slander can go worldwide on the internet, and last – forever.

James is right about our words. But I want you to notice in v.6, James says that the words you speak don’t just reveal who you are, they *affect* the way you are: they can stain or defile the whole body. I.e., The words you speak will change you. Listen to what Jesus said to His Disciples—

- Matthew 15:11 ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes *out of the mouth*; this *defiles* a person.”
- Matthew 15:18 ¹⁸But what comes *out of the mouth* proceeds from the heart, and this *defiles* a person.

So, if you get lazy and sloppy about your words; you start speaking sarcastically, you make off-color or racist jokes – but you’re just joking – people know that you aren’t really like that. No, you talk like that and you will become like that. *“What comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”* The words you speak will shape you – for better or for worse. Please think about this.

How hard is it to control our words? James says that—

D. The tongue is untamable.

- James 3:7–8 ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

When God created Adam and Eve, He commissioned them to subdue and rule over all of creation – Christians need to remember that: we are to be God’s stewards of creation. We’ve pretty much been able to tame every creature – but not our own tongues—*“no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”* Paul was describing the entire human race in—

- Romans 3:13 ¹³“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

I don’t know how you can turn what James and Paul say into some happy-clappy K-Love “positive, encouraging words.” This isn’t meant to be encouraging. It’s meant to humble us and convict us: we should read this and repent – and know that we will never be perfect this side of heaven, and neither will our words. But that’s no excuse. Finally, James says that—

E. The tongue is inconsistent.

- James 3:9–12 ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. (So he isn’t talking about unbelievers here, is he? This is a Christian who does this!)

And underline this verse: when we curse and cuss at people, we need to remember that they bear the image of God – that is *all* people – whatever their race or skin color; whatever their abilities or disabilities, saved or unsaved, and even those *not yet born*, all people are special creations of God, and God put the stamp of His image on each one of them. Oh, this so important. This is biblical basis for the way we should relate to and treat every person we meet: they bear the image of God!

Back in Genesis, God said that this is why murder is a crime against God that deserves capital punishment—

- Genesis 9:6 ⁶“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

When we *don't* put murderers to death we de-value human life and dishonor God's image. And what must God think when we abort tiny, vulnerable, dependent little image-bearers still “*under construction?*”

Here is James' point: Whatever you say to even the most ungodly, evil person, you are saying to one who bears God's image – so won't God take that personally? Think of that before you open your mouth. You praise God as your Lord and your heavenly Father, then turn around and curse a person who reflects His image? It's completely inconsistent and hypocritical—

- ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? (No.) ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? (No.) Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

So, we bless and we curse with the same blood-washed mouth – totally inconsistent with who we are. And this ought not to be! But it is, but then he says that it *can't* be. Am I right? It reminds me of Paul's question back in Romans, that he answers with another question—

- Romans 6:2 [Should we continue in sin so that God's grace may abound? May it never be!] How *can we* who died to sin still live in it?

Now, He isn't saying that sin is impossible, but he is saying that it is illogical, inconsistent and incongruent with who we are in Christ. it's outrageous! It's completely out of character—do you see that? You have died to sin—how *could* you still live in it??

III. So what?

So how do we apply this passage? There is one command, and that's to think twice about being a teacher. The rest is pretty much about how we fail miserably with our words. Right? So how does God expect us to apply a passage like this? How can you be a doer and not just a hearer?

1.) Prove James wrong!

If the tree is known by its fruit, then make the tree good and its fruit good! “From the same mouth come cursing and blessing?” – say, “Not out of my mouth! My tongue is not going to a full deadly poison, my tongue is not going to be set on fire by hell.” I can guarantee you: that's exactly the response the Holy Spirit wants from you and me this morning!

And that begins with confessing the sins of your mouth, repenting, and crying out for mercy to do better. When you are weak – then you are strong.

2.) Commit yourself to speak like Jesus.

Remember those rubber bracelets that just had: WWJD? – What would Jesus do? I want you to wear one (at least in your mind) that says WWJS? – What would Jesus say? How would He speak to this

person? How would He respond? (And often, Jesus remained silent!) Study the words of our Lord and see His wisdom, His restraint; how He always spoke the truth in love – sometimes tough love. See how much He quoted Scripture.

On the back of your outline I've given you a list of verses that I want you to read over and pray over, maybe even keep it in your Bible, or up on your refrigerator. Beloved, the more you speak the way Jesus would speak, the more you will be like Jesus.